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A.NOLEN

Assaulting Mt. Helicon: Writing and Current Affairs.

monthly archives: MARCH 2014

PONTIUS PILATE AND CHRIST

St. Andrew's Church on Kiev's Andriyivskyy Descent, where the Bulgakov family lived for a time.

The travesty that is *A Young Doctor's Notebook* left me with a bad taste in my mouth, so this weekend I want to wash it away with a reread of the introduction to *Master and Margarita*. I owe readers more analysis of Bulgakov's Christ-story. This subplot is the most important in the book because Christ is Bulgakov's template for a perfect writer. Bulgakov started *M&M* with the Devil Woland relating Christ's history to two Muscovite hacks-for-the-state, Berlioz and Bezdomnie. The book ends with Bezdomnie promising never again to write bad poetry: better no fame at all than fame at the price of his soul.

The Master and Margarita is about how artists shouldn't prostitute themselves to power; like Christ refused to prostitute himself.

I've written briefly about Bulgakov's interpretation of the life of Christ: he doesn't give the story from a purely biblical perspective, the author incorporates archeological knowledge and political science into the narrative. This isn't taking liberties; it's adding an erudite and educated element to our understanding of what Christ is recorded to have said.

Bulgakov's explanation of Christ and his sacrifice is rooted in the power-politics of Roman Jerusalem: Romans provide the muscle and law; the Rabbis provide the propaganda. Christ, like any real writer should, spoke what he saw as truth without deference to either power. Christ was pained to think that his message was misrepresented by the scribe Levi Matvei; Christ stood by his message facing Pontius Pilate's tribunal. Yeshua Ha-Nozri loved the world enough not to lie to it.

The most interesting character to come out of this (apart from Woland, the Devil) is Pontius Pilate. Pilate is not a villain like Kaifa, the chief Rabbi, neither is he a hero like Christ. The most powerful man in Jerusalem is *more* like one of us, he's caught between powers he can't control, he's terrified and he feels the lack of something wholesome.

I say 'more' like one of us, because of course, Pilate isn't 'one of us': he's a seasoned military commander, master of the secret police, a procurator– a man entrusted with power and the favor of the State. This makes him less free than you or I. Pilate is afraid of losing his power, a prospect which is doubly terrifying for him because failure to do what the Emperor asks could quickly land him on the cross along with Christ. (With some planning you or I can leave a job we don't like, but a man who is privy to state secrets can't just forget them, take his ball and go home.) These thoughts are at the forefront of Pilate's mind as he interrogates Jesus.

Pilate's plight is poignant because the man who he has been asked to unjustly condemn offers him hope. No more suffering alone with only his dog Banga at his side, no more emptiness. Ha-Nozri promises Pilate a wholesome philosophy which will bring the procurator truth, fulfillment, peace… but only if Pilate gets to hear the philosopher talk! Christ won't take Pilate's hints to lie under oath, so the innocent man is condemned and the procurator cheats himself out of happiness… and spends the next 2,000 years wishing he'd "just let Ha-Nozri go" and taken that walk with Christ through the palace gardens.

> *But, good heavens, philosopher! How can you, with your intelligence, allow yourself to think that, for the sake of a man who has committed a crime against Caesar, the procurator of Judea would ruin his career? 'Yes, yes…' Pilate moaned and sobbed in his sleep. Of course he would. In the morning he still would not, but now, at night, after weighing everything, he would agree to ruin it. He would do everything to save the decidedly innocent, mad dreamer and healer from execution!*

Pilate, as we all know, doesn't have the courage to go up against the rabbis and his employer to save Christ. So instead of doing the right thing and freeing Ha-Nozri, Pilate takes revenge by abusing his power as head of the secret service to murder Judas and shame Kaifa. Acts of second-rate freshness.

There's one more parallel I'd like to draw here. In his attempt to save Christ, Pilate asks him to lie: *say you're crazy so that you can be placed under house arrest in my home in Ceaserea*.

In *M&M*, the Master checks himself into a mental hospital after his book on Pontius Pilate, from which Woland quotes the story of Christ to Bezdomie, gets damning reviews. By betraying the truth of his *magnum opus*, the Master betrays himself and his readers, he symbolically checks into Pilate's house in Caeserea. That's why the Master deserves only peace, not heaven.

People pursuing a literary career should consider the fact that once you 'declare insanity'– be that literal, or by taking a position in print that you don't believe in but that gets you strokes from the 'right people'– once you do that, your reputation's in the gutter. Thinking people will have contempt for you. Truth and peace leave. You're just left with *stuff* and the idiots who haven't yet seen through you. Not a nice place to be. And it's not where Pilate or Bezdomnie wanted to be.

Every time I read *M&M* I find more in it to like, and Bulgakov's portrayal of Christ and Pontius Pilate is a very rich vein. Bulgakov's knowledge of Roman Judea is no accident, he was the grandson of two Orthodox priests and his father was a teacher at the Kiev Theological Academy. Bulgakov was in a perfect position to benefit from high-quality, turn-of-the-century biblical scholarship; a field of study which, sadly, has now been cheapened (in the West at least). It seems to me that Bulgakov's whole life was a lead-up to this incredible, *profound*, book.

I wonder how many times Pilate's tragedy was played out again in 'Kyiv' this winter?

LEAVE A COMMENT

REVEALED: VISITOR LOGS SHOW FULL EXTENT OF PIERRE AND PAMELA OMIDYAR'S COZY WHITE HOUSE TIES

anolen:

Just when you thought Pierre Omidyar couldn't get any uglier…"eBay founder Pierre Omidyar and his wife Pamela, had co-invested with the US government in opposition groups that played a key role in organizing Ukraine's recent revolution."

Originally posted on PandoDaily:

[White House officials] know who to call at The Times, they know who to call at The Post. With us, who are they going to call? Pierre? — ***Jeremy Scahill, First LookMedia***

Last month, Pando's Mark Ames reported that Omidyar Networks, the philanthropic organization operated by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar and his wife Pamela, had co-invested with the US government in opposition groups that played a key role in organizing Ukraine's recent revolution.

Unsurprisingly, given Omidyar is now running First Look Media, a journalistic enterprise dedicated to exposing US government wrongdoing around the world, some FLM staffers and supporters rushed to cry foul over our report.

USA Today's Rem Rieder argued that Omidyar Network's investments were a non-issue as they had been disclosed years earlier. Other supporters pointed out that, just because the Omidyars co-invested with the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the National Endowment for Democracy

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LEAVE A COMMENT

THE NEWS THAT'S FIT

AC360 Exclusive
Spot the Spook
WAHL: "... I CANNOT BE PART OF A NETWORK THAT WHITEWASHES THE ACTIONS OF PUTIN"
LIVE
CNN
IN UKRAINE WOULD HELP TO STABILIZE SITUATION THERE
8:27 PM ET

There was a time in my life when I wanted to be a journalist. Through a lucky family connection I got an internship (unpaid!) at a paper in Lawrence, MA. I was twenty-two and had only ever written for our college paper; the sports-desk editor was responsible for me although I worked at the business-desk. The Sports Editor was a good guy, but chaperoning an intern wasn't a plum assignment. "Thank god you can write," he told me after the first day– I guess that's not a given with journo-wannabes. It was a great internship; they published me regularly and the folks there gave me some of the best writing advice ever.

The day I left the paper a senior editor suggested the following: join the union and enroll in the Columbia University School of Journalism. He was connected to the school's administration in some way that I can't remember.

Needless to say, I didn't get in. After paying to take their assessment exam– full of important questions like "Name New York City's five boroughs"– they told me I didn't have enough professional experience. I didn't have much experience, few people do in their early twenties, but the industry was contracting and paid experience was hard to get. I needed money, I didn't know the right 'people' to get a job, so that was the end of that. Well, sorta. I found other ways to write.

My point with this story is this: God works in mysterious ways. Had my gambit for a journalistic career paid off, I could've ended up part of this:

"Russia's UN envoy Churkin replies to CNN anchor Amanpour"

But I wouldn't be writing to you [Christiane Amanpour] if you did not also choose to personally attack my daughter – your younger colleague – a Russian TV journalist. I am very proud of her – not only is she a good journalist, but she strictly keeps her professional distance from me.

Incidentally, I recall you married the State Department Spokesman. How was your professional credibility in the course of your courtship?

Don't bother to answer. I don't really want to know.

Or, I could have got sucked up into this:

Brainwash level – 'neocons': Staged Liz Wahl Psy-Op exposure explodes on Twitter

(Note, Buzzfeed!!) And that little spat gets even better with…

New report reveals how 'American neocons' stage attacks against alternative media

Clearly, had I been successful in my journalism 'career', I would have had two choices: Camp Neo or Camp Rus. I doubt I would have flourished in either, considering my interests. I was hoping for a career like The Winnebago Man, but that, dear readers, is a thing of the past.

So I take solice where I can find it, which is getting easier by the day. For instance, an interesting note on Liz Wahl:

Wahl quit her job at Russia Today on air after interviewing Ron Paul/ a US media love-fest over Abby Martin's comments which were critical of the Kremlin. Wahl says her reasons for quitting are that 1) RT gets Russian state funding and 2) they're spinning the situation in the Ukraine in Putin's favor.

I can't believe that Wahl didn't know who funded "RUSSIA Today" when she signed her first contract. Maybe her decision has more to do with her "military-base physician" husband– it's gotta be a career-killer to have Russian income in today's military. (Right?!?!) I say that tongue-in-cheek, because the US military is so weird right now who really knows.

Maybe the roots of this problem go a little deeper. Wahl describes herself as– deep breath– "Filipina-Hungarian-American", which caught my attention, because Hungarian immigrants in the 1950s were one of the groups which our CIA was eager to psychologically profile. (You can read all about that in the declassified MK-Ultra files.) The agency found *émigré* Hungarians' anti-Communist (read anti-Russian) stance interesting and useful. Add on top of that Wahl's family history in the military and you have a 'heady' combination! (Snark!)

So, call me crazy, but we may have something of a test-tube baby in the dear Mrs. Wahl. We may have someone who has grown up with a lot of special 'conditioning'. If you haven't had any experience with people like this, feel free to ignore these observations.

If, on the other hand, you know something of what I'm talking about, perhaps you'll join me in thanking my lucky stars that I never got a job in journalism. Over and out.

1 COMMENT

VICTORIAN KITCHEN GARDEN

A happy post this morning; another gem from the bounty of Youtube.

The Victorian Kitchen Garden is a 1987 program from the BBC and Sveriges Television 2. It's a gardening program but it's also a social history program, because it looks at the kitchen garden of a manor house as the unifying thread between all classes in rural Victorian society. The lord owned the land and the produce– he got the best that the hot-houses and orchards provided– but he was also responsible for feeding his house staff, garden corps, rural laborers and even tenants from what his garden produced. The gardeners grew what their lord ate, what they ate, what their peers ate and what everyone below them ate. Everyone had responsibilities to everyone else, and the more you enjoyed, the more responsibilities you had. This reciprocation is often neglected in modern views of less 'democratic' eras.

You could ask what any of this has to do with writing or current affairs. It has a lot to do with both. Writers are disproportionately gardeners, at least in my experience, because both endeavors require reflection. You can't be a good writer without wondering "Where are we all going?" and I promise you this: if we're lucky, the future is going to look a lot like *The Victorian Kitchen Garden*. And that's a good thing, because the VKG way of life is sustainable and accountable– at least more sustainable and accountable than what we've got now. A quote from the 'star' of the series, one of the last men trained in the Victorian gardening tradition, Harry Dodson:

> *The relationship between the head gardener and his master was a blend of professional respect and deference, as Harry recalls in an incident when he was a general foreman:*
>
> *"I was beginning to understand after I'd been there a day or two that, uh, his lordship was coming home from the forces and, uh, I probably wouldn't recognize him as a gentleman if I saw him about the gardens, but the tell-tale mark was that he was a very tall gentleman, slightly thinner than me and that he would be two or three inches above me in stature. I thought I'd got that plain and simple.*
>
> *The head gardener was a stickler. At eight o'clock the glasshouses had to be locked, and the yard into the glasshouses and the bothey (?) yard had to be locked also.*
>
> *This particular night I was locking up, and uh, on entering the fig-house, there was a– well I could call him a gentleman– the man was sat on the fig wall and he looked anything but a gentleman and uh, I said 'Good Evening,' to him and I said, 'Did you want Mr. Foster?' He said, 'No, no,' so I said, 'Okay'. I went on and I finished closing the rest of the glass and I knew that that man could not stop there, so I went*

back and asked him again if he'd seen Mr. Foster. He said 'No', and I said, 'I'm awfully sorry,' I said, 'but I'm going to have to ask you to leave.' He pulled himself up to full attention and said: 'I'm Lord Harcourt, and who are you?'

I went down to about so (lowers hand) and I could feel the color drain from my face! (Laughter.)

But he was a true aristocrat. He immediately put his hand out and he said, 'I'm pleased to meet you. Dodson, you couldn't possibly know who I am.' He couldn't have known who I was either, but we became very good friends and it was a pleasure to know him."

How many readers can say: "I work for a man like that"?

This program follows Victorian gardening techniques through the course of a year. There are a lot of great ideas for trapping heat and growing vegetables out-of-season in a temperate climate. These are simple, inexpensive techniques that everybody can use in some way; techniques that probably took many generations to collect and perfect. *The Victorian Kitchen Garden* is an exemplary bit of public television and the entire season's up on Youtube. Happy Spring!

LEAVE A COMMENT

NOTES FROM A COUNTRY DOCTOR

Don't use the Cyrillic alphabet for English words. Just don't do it. Please.

Mikhail Bukgalov is one of my favorite writers and I believe many people share my opinion, because his collection of short stories, *A Country Doctor's Notebook,* has a six-week waiting list at our local library. *A Country Doctor's Notebook* was published forty years ago, 1975, and was written decades before. The publishing industry calls that 'having legs'!

So, it was only a matter of time before somebody tried to make a T.V. show out of it.

A Young Doctor's Notebook, Sky Art's dramatization of Bulgakov's stories, fails spectacularly. This is a failure so complete that I'm left wondering if the script-writers and producers understood what they were reading when they picked up Bulgakov and flipped pages "obsessively" like the star Daniel Radcliffe. I'm left wondering if the creators of *A Young Doctor's Notebook* are even human.

Take episode two, for example. The poignant tale *An Embroidered Hand-Towel* is striped of the beauty and humanity which I tried to describe in this post, and turned into a slap-stick farce where a drug-addled 'Bulgakov' chases his younger self around the operating theater, while stumbling and sliding in the blood and severed limbs of an eight-year-old amputee, who lies unconscious on the table.

Stop and think about that for a second, because the T.V. show *really is* as monstrous as I've described. Is this comedy? Or is this program a not-so-subtle attack on Bulgakov, with an accidental 'outing' of the writers'/director's/producers' own mental illness? (Perhaps 'mental illness' is too kind, maybe they just *lack a soul*.)

Notably absent from this production is the sense of humility which the author learns through spending time with "backward" Russian peasants. In his stories, Bulgakov describes these peasants as traditional, wise, strong people who are also ignorant at times. Bulgakov learns over the course of his rural residency that his arrogance and "big city" provincialism are just a different type of provincialism. He learns wisdom and humility from these "backward" people.

But the writers in London and Los Angeles have missed the point; because this series does nothing but mock hay-seeds. The fairy-tales of the 'educated classes' are the most fanciful of all; also the most blind.

Instead, these writers focus on shitty bum-prints on chairs; unf*ckable (yet syphilitic) Russian women; and how much fun and sex you'd have if you were a Bolshevik.

This pathetic series is just a 'next step' in the British-lead character assassination of Bulgakov: belaboring drug addiction; suggesting his mother was neglectful; suggesting that he had contempt for peasants RATHER than the Bolshevik apparatchiks he consistently lampoons in his stories.

So who wrote this smut? According to producers Big Talk Productions:

Writers: Mark Chappell, Shaun Pye, Alan Connor
Producer: Clelia Mountford
Director: Alex Hardcastle
Executive Producers: Kenton Allen, Matthew Justice and Jon Hamm for

Jennifer Westfeldt's Points West Pictures (Jon Hamm and Jennifer Westfeldt are lovers; note how Jon's 'years active' coincides with the start of their relationship.)

If you care to click any of those links above, you'll be inundated with the career-stories of typical Brit media executives; these people are by no means exceptional or 'outliers'. This sorry lot is representative of the people who write what you're asked to watch.

Normally, I wouldn't be so disgusted by another smutty T.V. offering. However, this one is represents a bastardization of truly inspired writing and will put thinking people off an author who everyone should be reading. They've set literature and education back.

This inbred bunch of media professionals are continuing a peculiarly British tradition of misrepresenting and cheapening Bulgakov. The gold standard of this practice is represented by the work of Prof. Lesley Milne, as I've posted about here. The British establishment carries a special hatred for men and women with political views like Mikhail Bulgakov: anti-Bolshevik, pro-tradition, pro- Russia. *A Young Doctor's Notebook* is merely the latest offering in this hateful spewing.

Bulgakov is exceptional because he understood the relationship between the Bolshevik leadership and their US/UK/German financial supporters. He understood the role that the secret service ANYWHERE plays in undermining the Arts in service of the State. He understood Cultural Marxism. And he told stories really well, which made him deadly to the 'revolutionary establishment'.

That, dear readers, is why the current British regime doesn't like him. Kill your T.V. and Happy Reading!

By the way, any readers interested in the ridiculous situation in the Ukraine will do well to read *The Master and Margarita*; or short of that, a couple of my posts on the Mikhail Bulgakov page. There is nothing new under the sun.

3 COMMENTS

DEFENSE AGAINST THE DARK ARTS

More Encryption means Fewer Pixies.

> Attempting to add more encryption is just likely to have more broken encryption on the internet. – Poul-Henning Kamp, FOSDEM 2014

Edward Snowden spoke at SXSW on Monday; the theme of the ACLU's panel was that more encryption will protect us all from NSA spying. Snowden went as far as to make an unfortunate Harry Potter reference, calling encryption a "defense against the dark arts". More encryption is supposed to make it more expensive for the US government to spy on everybody.

Snowden's interview at SXSW was all sorts of irresponsible. First and foremost, I'll point out that while Snowden told us that encrypting hard drives and networks is the key to blocking out spooks, he didn't name which programs he uses to accomplish these two things. For someone with the public's interest at heart, he's very shy about helping the public protect their interests by sharing details. If I was Snowden, sharing which code is 'clean' would be at the top of my agenda, especially since the US Congress has shown itself to be so ineffectual. (I'd feel better if Snowden didn't look so happy as he skirted this important issue.)

Instead, Snowden states that any mathematician will tell you the encryption math works. Here's the rub: pure math rarely translates into perfect code. What do I mean by that? 'Shortcuts'– or at least subjective coding decisions– are made for the sake of code that works. Sometimes, a nefarious sabotage will be hidden in this 'subjectivity'. Remember BULLRUN and RC4's (probable) random number generator that wasn't random? For a long time everybody thought RC4 did what it's supposed to do even though it was compromised; compromised *despite* the existence of sound math behind why random numbers are good for cryptography!

Here's another example of pure math not making it into the code. SHA-256 is a hashing algorithm that is widely used in cryptography. It uses a mathematical idea (circular shift) that can't be directly expressed in C (a coding language), so coders have to use different ways to get a result that looks right. Check out all the opinions (subjectivity) that coding 'circular shift' generates on StackOverflow. Take your pick, because if there's an exploitable situation, the NSA sure will.

Now, I'm not saying SHA-256 is cracked. I'm saying that I found this 'window for subjectivity' after about 5 min looking; so imagine what I could do with a full-time job looking for holes. (Then imagine what a techie could do.) There's bound to be one window that's NSA-exploitable. Edward: pure math is no proof that encryption works in practice. You know that. (And so does Vladimir.)

I hope that these last four paragraphs explain why it's so important that Edward tell us what programs/encryption implementations he's using to secure his data. (There are over 1300 implementations of SHA-256 out there, are they all equally good?!) If you're not technically minded though, here's one more explanation. There's no word for 'No' in Chinese. Therefore, people express 'no' in a myriad of roundabout ways that are all subject to misinterpretation. See the problem? Turning pure math into working code has similar challenges. We need the program/implementation details, Ed.

So that's my beef with calling for 'more encryption' in general; what about the specific implementation of network 'encryption' through Tor? Amazingly, none of the MSM journos noticed that Snowden praised and damned Tor in the same breath. It's good for blocking run-of-the-mill, "default", dragnet-surveillance says Edward, but if you're personally targeted by the spooks, you're done for. Contrast that with how Appelbaum sells Tor: encryption for political activists and journalists. Ya think political activists and journalists are personally targeted for surveillance? Maybe? Again, the responsible thing for Ed to have done was advise against using Tor. He didn't do that.

Unlike Ed and the ACLU and the Kremlin, I don't think encryption is a magic bullet. My opinion is based on the advice of two well respected people, William Binney and Poul-Henning Kamp. These are the guys who, I believe, really know what they're talking about. So I'll let them speak in their own words.

Last year, I posted a link to a video of Bill Binney speaking at MIT about his work for the NSA. Binney designed the NSA's massive data collection systems. Here's what he has to say about encryption:

> *[Question about securing communications]*
>
> *[Binney] We were talking about this earlier [securing communicaitons]. In my mind, the safest way to do it– no online cypher is safe, simply because if they don't have the key, they'll come across and get it from you.That's assuming they didn't already plant it in your system. The safest way is to do everything offline, encryption offline, then go online and send it. Then do decryption offline. But you have to have an air gap there. If you don't have that air gap, you're not safe.*
>
> *[Question about embedding.]*
>
> *[Binney] That's embedding. That's not safe.*
>
> *[Question about if NSA can break SHA encryption standards.]*
>
> *[Binney] You mean like 128 or 256 [SHA encryption standards]? I don't think they [the NSA] have to break them at all. They already have them. I mean, that's my point. You've got back doors. No online system is safe. [Unintelligible] Or, they're [the company] required by law to put a back door into the system so that the FBI can listen to it.*
>
> *Q: A lot of times we hear discussion that you can see the patterns and that will tell us who the bad guys are. What you're presenting here is that they have lots of information and if they want to go after David Petraeus, or for that matter, Bill Binney, they can then turn the spotlight and get all of your data, all the data that they've collected. Is there a capability at this point that you're aware of or that you can foresee that by taking all the data then suddenly it's going to tell you who the bad guy is? They're talking about predictive policing.*
>
> *[Binney]They already did that. That's what we maintained was the way to do it. We had no problem making those decisions. They apparently still do. And the reason I thought was that they really wanted to spy on the United States. And they claim it as an excuse: "We're still having trouble, we can't do it– unless we can take in all this data we won't be able to achieve that end [safety from terrorism]". That's simply false.*
>
> *[Question about what communications make you a suspicious person in the NSA's eyes.]*
>
> *[Binney]…would default out or you mean if they [the NSA] couldn't break it? If they didn't have a key that would work? Yes, generally they say that's very suspicious. That's what the FBI says. If you're encrypting, it's suspicious. You're already, you know, that's tick number one for the hit list. Okay? I don't know how many more ticks you have to have before you get on the list. Or what it takes to get off once you're on. After all, Sen Kennedy up here was on the no-fly list for so many months; he had trouble getting off. Well, if he got on it and had trouble getting off, imagine any one of us, what problems we would have.*

The take-home is that even if you encrypt, your data is still vulnerable after you send/receive it, because of spy-bugs in the software/hardware you used to view/store it.

What Binney says is a big deal. I wonder how many journalists/bloggers who proudly display their public encryption keys on their Twitter profile keep their private key on a separate, off-line computer? My guess is not many. In effect, they are signalling to the FBI/NSA "Look at me!" while offering up their private key to the government on a platter.

Snowden and the ACLU would say this: if enough people use encryption– if enough people put a target on their back– it's just too expensive to watch them all. I refer the ACLU to the 'subjective/broken code' issue I've just described, and to Poul-Henning Kamp's FOSDEM 2014 talk, quoted below. Poul-Henning Kamp is a widely-respected

security expert who has spent a lot of time working in the open-source community– he's seen stuff go down.

[The following quote is taken from FOSDEM 2014, where Kamp conducts a 'thought experiment' pretending to be an NSA 'executive' debriefing the brass on what his department does to monitor the internet. The 'thought experiment' showcases what Kamp suspects the NSA currently does.]

> *This is another interesting program that we're [the NSA are] working on. It's actually inspired by a field accident. We had to evacuate a high-risk, and high-quality, resource. We had no facilities nearby his location that could be used. So we set him up as an independent contractor. Story was, you know, "tired of the boss, company politics" yada, yada. Started for himself, was lucky to find some customers, and so on. While sitting there, he spent some time on some open-source software project– had to do something! He spotted some opportunities for ground work.*
>
> *Most open-source projects are based on trust. There's no formal vetting, there's no checking people's resumes, there's no checking if they're really who they say they are. It's like: "Oh, I'm this dude who sits in Ulaanbaatar and here's some patches!" And if you send good patches for some years, people will start to trust you, and not check your patches; and they will give you a commitment so that you can add them yourself because that's really much easier. It's a fantastic environment. People can come in and nobody knows that your a 'doc' or NSA agent.*
>
> *So not only can you collect information about the project's interior that way, once the trust is in place you can start to influence their code. Perception is an easy thing to get right here, it's like: "Yeah, you know, I sit at this non-profit thing, and as long as the email works and the printers print– it's all humming. I'm sitting here seven hours of day doing not a shit." "Okay, cool! Here's a dude who has time and he's delivering good code." And one of the things we've found out here is that we can do– in reality, this is one of our people, and he's sitting somewhere in a shop-front that looks like it's this non-profit thing for stopping, I don't know, oak trees falling over. And actually, that's our neighbors who have this shop-front, and they need somebody to get the computers to work in this little stealth setup they have, and we need to have an ethernet and a desk for our man, so it's very convenient, and the bosses can claim "We're doing cooperative work and saving money!" It's really well run.*
>
> *And of course, you cannot go in and add obvious vulnerabilities to source code, people will spot that. It has to be more subtle than that. 'Programming Mistakes.' The careless semicolon, 0/1 based errors, all these classics. It's kind of dangerous to do it yourself; it's better to say "Oh, I got this patch and I looked at it, and it looks okay," and stick it in. People will start to notice if your own code quality sucks, but if you accept patches which are not quite up to standard– well, everybody can have a bad day.*
>
> *So in general, obfuscating the code, making it harder to understand critical bits of the code, makes it easier to make it* ***almost*** *do what it's supposed to do. And misleading documentation is always a wonderful thing, particularly for crypto-sensitive stuff, and deceptive defaults so that things don't do what people think. It doesn't have to be the core code. It doesn't have to be the operating system kernel. In previous FreeBSD, [there were] 20k packages of software that were built for patches needed for BSD– nobody ever looks at those patches. Whoever ported this piece of software just sticks a patch in and that's it, it's never reviewed. In general, nobody has ever looked at all the patches in previous FreeBSD port collections. They should.*
>
> *So, this is our poster boy: the Debian random number generator. [Applause] This was really beautifully executed: this dude who sends in the patch says, "This patch gets Valgrind to complain and it doesn't seem to do anything sensible, you should just remove it." And they did. So for two years, all the Debians had lousy random numbers which which made brute-forcing SSL keys [snaps fingers] "Done!"*
>
> *He earned a pretty good bonus!*
>
> *Open SSL is the crown jewel. [Applause] Open SSL is the standard library if you want crypto. Getting SSL to work with all browsers without Open SSL is very tricky. Reading the Open SSL manuals or source code is not tricky– that's close to impossible. And that's 300,000 lines of code. So good luck with that. The documentation is deficient and misleading and the defaults are deceptive. They don't do what you think they do. This saves so much money in collection you have no idea.*

The sad truth is that 'open-source' and 'widely-used' are qualities the NSA can't resist; they present an information-rich opportunity for cracking. There is no white-knight brotherhood of open-source wizards who will write a secure encryption program with a cute GUI *that will work properly for long*.

If we're going to reclaim online privacy, the general public will need to be more savvy and suspicious than we have been in the past. The easy-to-use and effective encryption program that the ACLU and Snowden call for will be a constantly moving target. Is the general public ready for the hunt? Until they are, shouting for 'more encryption' is counterproductive.

Edward Snowden did a great thing for humanity when he exposed the NSA's, and partner spying operations', offensive practices against the people they're supposed to serve. I don't begrudge him trying to scrape

out a life from what's left to him; kowtowing to Putin and his American Buddies is part of that. However, it is now in the public's interest to take whatever Edward says with a grain of salt.

So what do we *do*? Ending with another quote from Kamp/FOSDEM 2014, where he addresses the audience directly, NOT as an imaginary NSA agent!

> ***The standard reaction in the open-source environment to Edward Snowden's disclosures has been "We need to strengthen the protocols! We need to have SSL everywhere!" I think that misses the point by a large margin. The things that have been published by the Snowden documents, by now, are the things that the general public can understand reading their newspaper. The stuff we would be interested in have not been published and maybe never will. Attempting to add more encryption is just likely to have more broken encryption on the internet. This is not a technical problem, this is a political problem. It must be solved by political means. That means find politicians in your country who can understand this and make sure they understand it. If you cannot find these politicians,* get you some*… This is your children's, grandchildren's future society you're looking at.***

I think Kamp understands the ACLU better than most.

4 COMMENTS

PASSING NOAM ON MY WAY OUT – PART 1

anolen:

Another excellent post from The Rancid Honeytrap, one of the more thoughtful bloggers online. Chomsky's university is MIT for the uninitiated.

Originally posted on The Rancid Honeytrap:

I wasn't always the #ChickenPseudoRadical that worshipers of lefty icons love to hate, but there were signs of what the future held for me when I wrote this in my Pulitzer prize-winning post on Chris Hayes:

> *Somehow lefts that would, on a rainy day, apply the Chomsky/Herman lens to a bag of Doritos are incapable of applying it to establishment lefts at the margins, even when these people are on commercial television. Understandable, really, since I don't think Chomsky gets how Chomsky applies to Chomsky either.*

This line ruffled some feathers. I recall that one person cited it just before telling me I should kill myself, more than a full year before Glenn Greenwald incited the troll fever of 2013 by telling me I should kill myself too.

In the months that passed I've concluded that I grossly exaggerated the extent to which the internet left applies the Chomsky/Herman…

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LEAVE A COMMENT

SXSW: THAT'S ALL FOLKS!

Snowden spoke at SXSW and all I got was this lousy…

Edward Snowden: Live today from underneath Putin's wing! Edward spoke at the prestigious South by Southwest Interactive conference at noon ET via a webcast from his safe house in Moscow. Somehow, the ACLU and SXSW coordinators got access to the whistle-blower through Vladimir's gatekeepers. (Does the ACLU have a special phone line to the Kremlin?!)

~~Chaperoning Snowden~~ Chairing the event was Ben Wizner, director of the ACLU's Speech, Privacy & Technology Project and Edward Snowden's legal advisor; also talking is Christopher Soghoian, the ACLU's principal technologist.

You can catch an audio of Snowden's talk here: be prepared for a lot of distortion– distortion from being bounced off seven proxies, or just poorly set up AV? You decide!

It doesn't really matter that we can't hear Snowden, *I guess*, because Christopher and Ben tell us how to interpret what Snowden says and what the answers to important questions are. If I remember correctly, the ACLU also sent a chaperone to Bill Binney's talk at MIT in Dec 2012, months before Snowden's leaks broke.

The thrust of Christopher's argument is that the government should step in to help keep us safe from government spying. Oh yeah, and Christopher has taken a page out of Jacob Appelbaum's NSA playbook: the big tech companies (Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Yahoo) have improved their security and the government is becoming more accountable. Now that these NSA-complicit mega tech firms are encrypting everything, "we're at a secure place now," according to Christopher. God help us all.

Ed's talking about the need for conversation on government spying; the ACLU'ers are talking about how it's so great that we're all safe now.

See the problem?

Snowden took questions from Twitter; these questions were pre-screened by an undisclosed group of people 'in the back'. Questions from important people like Tim Berners-Lee got precedence. (If the US military and Tim both invented the internet, what does that mean about Tim?)

What does Snowden say himself? It's very hard to tell. He appears to say that "the encryption algorithms used today work", with provisos that are too unclear to hear in the audio I could find. Christopher says that the "security community"– the people paid by Google and other NSA partner companies– will fix compromised cryptography programs in the future. So don't worry about it, Joe Voter.

Snowden appears to say that "attacking Tor by itself is incredibly hard," but "if the NSA is after you they're still going to get you". Christopher seemed to agree with Ed's opinion, when asked the following:

> *When there is a question about protecting regular people, and the answer is Tor?*
>
> *"We've failed," the panelists [Christopher and Edward] say.*

'The panelists" opinion shows tweets like the following from *The Wall Street Journal's* Wilson Rothman to be *pure misinformation*.

> *Snowden's tips for privacy: 1) encrypt your hard drive (easy) 2) use non-tracking plug-ins (med), and 3) cover your tracks with Tor (hard)*
>
> *— Wilson Rothman (@wjrothman) March 10, 2014*

Snowden's own leaks show Tor to be vulnerable; the only responsible thing to do would be to advise people not to use The Onion Router. Snowden doesn't appear to do this.

*Update: According to RT's copy of the interview, Snowden gives a side-step endorsement of Tor, while also explaining how that network is vulnerable. He lists two steps for protecting data, neither of which specifically mentions Tor: full disk encryption (against seizure) and network encryption. *

The other key point that the ACLU wants to drive home is that encryption, while imperfect, makes dragnet surveillance too expensive. It appears that the encryption the ALCU is talking about is encrypting data as it's delivered over the web.

When Bill Binney talked about encryption in Dec 2012, he called it a red flag for the NSA: they think you're worth watching if you use encryption to send information. It's putting a target on your back. That aside, encryption is only good if you decrypt the information on a computer that doesn't have contact with the internet, from which back doors in other unrelated programs could be accessed and used to harvest your data. Snowden doesn't appear to address this problem either; which is irresponsible.

Correction: According to RT's copy of the interview, Snowden does mention this 'back door' issue. His answer is make sure your encryption key is never exposed. He doesn't say which encryption programs he uses to do this or how he keeps his keys safe.

The show's over folks, because Snowden's ~~NSA~~ KGB now. I don't think he can be trusted because of the compromised position Putin and Obama have put him in. He wasn't given a free microphone in this interview, because what he says is so distorted that we must rely on his ACLU handlers for 'interpretation'. Don't forget to pick up your ACLU whistle on the way out.

P.S. I will be looking for transcripts of this talk and will update this post as I find out more. In the meantime, if you're interested in keeping your data secure, I think your time is better spent thinking along the lines of Poul-Henning Kamp.

UPDATE The seven proxy servers seem to work better in Russia. Ed's SXSW speech thanks to RT.com. Audio here, minus distortion.

LEAVE A COMMENT

GRAND THEFT AUTONOMY

anolen:

In light of recent events in the Ukraine, I'm re-blogging this post on how the US engineers 'revolutions'; Gentlemen, this is getting really old. My apologies to regular readers.

Originally posted on a.nolen:

The face that launched a thousand careers.

When I was a young analyst, nearly a decade ago now, I sat next to a really smart kid at work. We shared open cubicles and I had a good view of his screen from my desk. One day I saw he was playing a video game.

"Whatcha doing?" I asked. I wanted to play too.

"This is a beta version of a game I've been asked to try out."

"At work?"

"Yeah, (his boss) gave it to me."

"Cool. What type is it?"

"A training game."

The premise of the game was to engineer a *coup d'etat* using 'soft power' techniques: recruiting radicals, disseminating propaganda, courting media. You could engineer your own 'color revolution' from a digital console. I couldn't play long, because George Soros was giving a talk downstairs that afternoon and somebody had to set out the coffee cups.

The…

View original 826 more words

LEAVE A COMMENT

OLIGARCHS

Because the Americans would never do *that*…

I don't think anyone is surprised to learn that the new 'Maidan' government in the Ukraine has appointed a handful of oligarchs to rule over industry-rich, and largely pro-Russian, eastern regions. Nor were folks surprised to hear that one of the first delegations the West sent to 'Kyiv' were a handful of ~~bankers~~ "economic reformers".

It may turn your stomach to read that the new nationalist government, who seem like a bunch of 'neo-Nazis' from Central Casting, is now attacking the Ukrainian riot police for *doing their job*. The junta in Kyiv is considering making dual citizenship *and being politically active* punishable by 10 years in jail; this new law comes just as Russia began to provide sanctuary for Berkut (riot police) and other Ukrainian refugees by offering dual citizenship. Illegalization of politically-active dual citizens is a move aimed at liquidating opposition to the Kyiv regime. American activists take note, just like with drones, you're next.

A few weeks ago I wrote how Mikhail Bulgakov distrusted Ukrainian Nationalism in the 1910s, because he saw it was a tool of Bolshevism, the internationally-funded movement that had just eaten Russia. He thought that the nationalists' foolishness would guarantee a future of debt and backwardness for generations of Ukrainians. I predicted how modern nationalist tools would hand over Ukraine to Western bankers, social engineers…

And look what happened! Maidan Nationalists, do you like millionaires messing in your politics?

> *The self-proclaimed government in Kiev has appointed two of Ukraine's richest men to govern large industrial regions in the defiant east. One of the reasons for the Maidan protest was the influence the rich have on politics in the country.*

Do you feel that dual citizenship should be illegal?

> *The newly-appointed Dnepropetrovsk governor is Igor Kolomoysky, Ukraine's third-wealthiest man, with an estimated fortune of $2.4 billion. He co-owns the informal*

> *commercial group Privat, which includes Ukraine's largest bank Privatbank, which Kolomoysky heads, as well as assets in the oil, ferroalloys and food industries, agriculture and transport.*
>
> *A former ally of Yulia Tymoshenko, Kolomoysky reportedly had a falling out with her and refused to finance her election campaign in 2010, which the ex-prime minister subsequently lost to Yanukovich. Kolomoysky was reported to be a principal sponsor of the UDAR party, which is one of the three fueling the street campaign to oust Yanukovich. Kolomoysky has a dual Ukrainian-Israeli citizenship and controls his business empire from Switzerland.*

If I was a Ukrainian Nationalist right now, I'd turn my lynch mob on the American and Israeli 'military advisors' who just sold my brothers' sacrifice to the highest bidder. But if the nationalists were smart, they wouldn't have worked with these *agents provocateurs* in the first place. Let's hope that Russia finds a way to keep the peace… again.

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